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Radio Martí Goes on Air and Cuba Retaliates by Ending Pact

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MIAMI, May 20 — A new United States broadcasting service aimed at Cuba went on the air shortly before dawn today, and the Cuban Government responded sharply by suspending a major immigration agreement with the United States and threatening other measures.

In a strongly worded statement condemning the new service, known as Radio Martí, Cuba said it was also suspending visits to Cuba by Cubans living in the United States and was reconsidering its agreement with the United States on prosecuting airliner hijackers. The statement did not give details.

The immigration agreement, the first major agreement between the two countries in seven years, provided for the return to Cuba of nearly 3,000 Cubans with histories of crime or mental illness and the acceptance by the United States of up to 20,000 Cuban immigrants a year.

Reagan Statement Broadcast

The United States also agreed to accept about 3,000 political prisoners who had been released from jails some years ago. The Cuban Government's action today appeared to bring these procedures to a halt.

In a brief statement read by a Radio Martí announcer, President Reagan said he hoped the new service would "help defuse the war hysteria on which much of current Cuban Government policy is predicated."

The Cuban Government said it regarded the United States' use of the name of José Martí, the Cuban independence hero and poet, as a "gross insult."

The State Department spokesman, Bernard Kalb, said the United States regretted the suspension of the immigration agreement and the ban on visits to Cuba, adding, "We hope the Cubans will reconsider this action."

Radio Interference Feared

The Cuban Government also said it was planning to "adopt additional measures relating to the communications between the United States and Cuba."

A State Department official said he was not able to interpret the meaning of this statement, but some American broadcasters said they feared it raised the possibility of interference with commercial radio broadcasting in the United States.

At the White House, Larry Speakes, the spokesman, said the Cubans "have the capability" of "extensive interference with commercial broadcasting."

Journalists in Havana said that the first broadcast of Radio Martí, which opened with a report on the Cuba Government's reaction, was heard clearly and without any apparent interference. In Miami, Radio Martí, broadcasting at 1190 kilohertz on the AM dial, was received clearly at first, but within an hour or so was being overcome by broadcasts from commercial stations in the area.

Radio Martí, which is to broadcast

news, entertainment and sports in Spanish for 14½ hours a day from studios in Washington and a 50,000-watt transmitter in the Florida Keys, was first proposed by the Reagan Administration four years ago. It was established by Congress as a branch of the Voice of America in October 1983 with an annual operating budget of \$10 million.

Start Is Delayed

Opponents had argued that Radio Martí might become a strident vehicle for anti-Castro propaganda that would worsen United States-Cuban relations. In the final legislation creating Radio Martí, Congress said it was intended to "serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of accurate, objective and comprehensive news."

Responding to a question about the Cuban Government's reaction to Radio Martí's inauguration, Mr. Speakes said, "If that is their reaction to the lawful presentation of accurate, balanced and objective news reports, then that speaks volumes for the Cuban Government."

There had been a series of delays in putting Radio Martí on the air, which Reagan Administration officials said had been caused by difficulties in hiring staff members and a cumbersome process of national security checks. Over the weekend, some Congressional sources in Washington said that Radio Martí had been ready to go on the air since January, but that it had been held up while senior Administration officials considered the possible reactions from Cuba and how the United States would respond.

From the start, Cuban officials had denounced Radio Martí as "an aggressive act" against Cuba. Earlier this month some of them indicated that they had begun to interpret the delays as evidence of improved relations between the United States and Cuba.

For more than a year, Fidel Castro has been saying he would welcome better relations with the United States. But the United States has said there can be no change until Mr. Castro fundamentally alters his close relationship with the Soviet Union and renounces his policy of involvement in Africa and Central America.

'Surprising,' Havana Says

Despite statements from United States officials to the contrary, Cuban Government officials interpreted the signing of the immigration last Dec. 14 as an improvement in the relations of the two countries.

In its statement about Radio Martí, the Cuban Government described the start of the broadcasts as "surprising."

The action, it said, "takes place at a time in which constructive and diverse steps had been taken to diminish the existing tensions between the two countries."

Shortly before Radio Martí began broadcasting at 5:30 A.M., a chartered flight carrying visiting relatives and 11 former political prisoners arrived in Miami. The former prisoners were the first of some 3,000 who were to be flown to the United States as part of the immigration agreement, which included the return to Cuba of 2,746 Cubans who

United States authorities had said were unacceptable as immigrants because of histories of crimes and mental illness. So far 201 of these Cubans, who have been held in United States prisons, have been returned to Cuba.

As another part of the December agreement, the United States said that the normal immigration of Cubans would be resumed and that up to 20,000 Cuban immigrants a year would be accepted into the United States.

United States officials in Havana said in recent interviews that a little more than 700 immigration applications had been approved and that 127 people had left for the United States.

Normal immigration from Cuba was stopped in 1980 in reaction to the illegal exodus of some 125,000 Cubans from the port of Mariel in what came to be known as "the Mariel boatlift."